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ON PAGE 60-62

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Presidential Courage—and the Iranian Rescue Missio

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AS WE REMEMBER AND HONOR this Memorial Day the eight men who gave their lives at Desert One last April 25th, the men from that rescue mission would tell you there is one casualty for whom there will never be a medal, although they believe he deserves it most—former President Jimmy Carter.

The men of Joint Task Force 1-79 speak of Jimmy Carter with a respect that borders on awe, a reverence almost, that one seldom hears from military men—because they *expect* courage of leaders who order hazardous missions, just as they believe those leaders should be able to *expect* courage of them.

There is an unwritten axiom of special military operations: the world hears about them only when they fail, never when they succeed. A basic premise of such work is that it be deniable; thus the guts of even the most successful missions aren't advertised. Secrecy strictures are so tight and enduring that the truth behind them rarely surfaces; when it does (if ever), it is invariably long after the mission. A regrettable but frequent by-product of that secrecy is that the people who risk such missions seldom obtain proper credit—publicly *or* professionally—even for acts of the most compelling courage.

Presidential courage takes many forms. The nation has just *seen* one kind—in the graceful, reassuring calm and infectuous humor with which Ronald Reagan reacted to his attempted assassination on March 30th after taking a bullet through the lung. But the nation has not even *heard* of Jimmy Carter's courage a year ago. With the mission's first anniversary here, the men he asked to rescue our former hostages want Jimmy Carter to be given credit for a form of courage which they say far transcended theirs.

At this time last year, the nation was clamoring for some kind of Presidential *action* to resolve the hostage crisis. Some civilians in government, despairing of ever recovering the hostages, had even proposed a B-52 raid to level the holy city of Qom. Their patience, like others', was exhausted, hopes having been dashed once too often from the on-again, off-again diplomatic channels through which the Administration hoped to recover the hostages.

Carter had ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to ready a rescue mission eight days after the hostages had been seized, and the first plan was ready on December 20th (albeit, its planners had cautioned, with elements of risk that concerned them greatly).

The mission, the President and its planners had emphasized, was to be a rescue

months before last April 16th, when Carter finally approved launching it, the President had made it clear that the nation would pursue *one* goal—"To protect our national honor and interests, and bring the hostages home *alive*." Throughout the task force's planning, the "operative" word was "alive." And, Carter had emphasized quietly to the few people really privy to his thinking, he felt the Presidency bound to resolve the crisis along Constitutional lines—diplomacy first; military options would be used only if diplomacy failed.

Late last March, Carter's hopes were high that release of the hostages was imminent. Through a complex, prearranged scenario, Carter was to get a set of signals from Iran that were supposed to trigger a positive public statement from him; given it, Iranian officials had agreed, the hostages would then be transferred to government control, the first and crucial step leading to their freedom. As Jody Powell recounts those trying days, the signals from Iran came three days late—through a coincidence, shortly after midnight on April 1st, the 150th day of captivity— and the morning of the Wisconsin primary. At seven a.m., Carter made his positive statement, announcing at the White House that the crisis was abating and that the hostages would soon be home. But it soon became apparent, once again, that the Iranians were unable or unwilling to follow through.

Carter was later criticized brutally for his awkwardly timed statement; political pundits charged that he had politicized the hostage issue to win a primary.

But there is one powerful indication that the President had read the diplomatic signal in good faith: it was given enough credence within the Pentagon that a senior officer relied on it to disapprove the planned early deployment of some of the rescue team members to the Persian Gulf. Within days of that hopeful news, however, the crisis and apparent danger of losing the hostages reached new heights: Iranian spokesmen announced (previously they had only "warned") that some hostages would be tried as spies. Under Iranian justice, spies are shot: those convicted before noon are executed by sundown; those convicted after noon are executed by noon the next day. Carter's advisors were well aware that some 460 Iranians had already been executed after such quick "trials." All promising diplomatic avenues had run their course with no favorable outcome. Carter did not need to be reminded that it is proper for a President to use military force when diplomacy fails or stalls.

Yet, Jimmy Carter was profoundly

tage rescue mission a year ago Thursday, April 16th, that the mission might not succeed. He had asked in a final White House review before the entire National Security Council that evening (according to a former White House official present at the three-hour meeting), "'What are the chances of success?"

Recollections of that meeting vary slightly, but six people who were present agree that the President was told something very close to this:

"The mission has high prospects for success. But if something goes wrong, the odds become somewhere between zero and 100 percent, and those two numbers could be *very* close together. We won't know how close, or how far apart, until we get *into* Iran. Any number of unforeseen factors, none of which we can precisely predict or control, could cause the whole thing to go to hell in a handbasket." Factors such as desert weather, Iranian forces turning up in the wrong place, a last minute move of the hostages, and equipment failures were cited. One of the four Carter was specifically warned about—equipment failure—would later cause the mission to fail; another factor he was warned about, weather, contributed to the abort at Desert One.

Based on the factors they *could* control, the briefer told the President, he and his men were confident they could free the hostages *and* bring them home alive. (Today, intelligence sources say, debriefings of the former hostages confirm that the rescue force knew the precise location, down to their very rooms, of 95% of the 51 men and two women they tried to rescue—and would quickly have located the others based on information gleaned during the mission.) But the briefer was equally clear in telling the President that there could be casualties on both sides if something went awry, according to one White House official present in the Situation Room that evening. In that case, the President was told, "Perhaps one aircraft crew could be lost somewhere along the way; three to eight hostages killed or wounded; three to eight rescue team members killed or wounded; and an indeterminate number of Iranians, depending on how they elect to respond."

Thus, James Earl Carter knew last April that the mission he was ordering was not without substantial risk, that it might fail, and that there could be casualties, even among the hostages he had sworn to bring home alive.

It was not the kind of prognosis that